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**B0515 – April 10, 2005 – Major Bible Themes**  
**Chapter 05 – God the Trinity–Part 2**

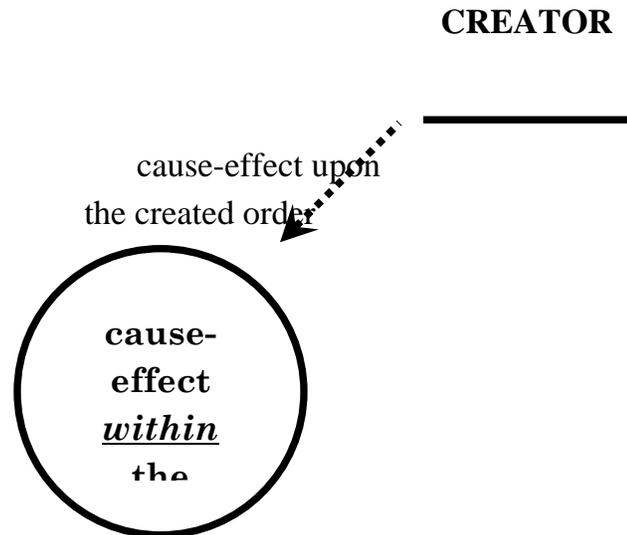
**ATTRIBUTES OF GOD**

A. W. Tozer once said that every heresy stems from a wrong view of who God is. Therefore, it is essential for every Christian to have a right view of who God is. If we don't understand who God is how can we understand ourselves, creatures made in His image? As we come to know Him more fully we come to know ourselves more fully. This is why seeing Christ will be a transforming experience (1 John 3:2). Unbelievers are constantly trying to discover who they are by experiencing more things. The reason they never discover who they are has nothing to do with their experiences. The reason they haven't discovered who they are is because they don't know who God is. They know God exists but they suppress this knowledge and refuse to admit they are creatures made in His image.

To understand who God is, it is important to know two words: essence and attributes. “Essence is the being or nature of a person, what that person is like.”<sup>i</sup> Attributes are “those qualities which compose the essence of a person.”<sup>ii</sup> So, essence is the whole person of God and attributes are *like* the parts that make up the whole. However, we can never say that God is part sovereign, part righteous, part just, part love, part omnipresent, etc..., but rather He is each of these attributes entirely.

To understand who God is we must also reflect on two teachings of Scripture; the Creator-creature distinction and the incomprehensibility of God. God is the Creator, man is the creature. This means God cannot be thought of solely in terms of creaturely experience. For example, thinking of God's sovereignty, we must never try to understand it in terms of creature cause-effect. When we do we falsely think of God's sovereignty as determinism. The biggest problem people have is with Divine Sovereignty and the human will but these only become problematic when we try to bring these two together within creation.

Sovereignty is a Creator quality, not a creature quality. Therefore we must think of God's cause-effect upon the created order as different from cause-effect within the created order.



**Cause-effect upon the created order is not identical to cause-effect within the created order.**

This is a crucial distinction. This distinction must be maintained if you are to avoid pagan determinism or chance.

Secondly, God is incomprehensible. This means that God cannot be known exhaustively. To know God exhaustively one would have to be omniscient and even if God could be known exhaustively then He wouldn't be worthy of our worship. It's *because* God is incomprehensible that we worship Him. At the same time we must not take this to the extreme. We must not say God cannot be known at all. God can be known truly in part. We must say that God can be known truly but not exhaustively. What can be known about God? that which has been revealed in Holy Scripture. **Deuteronomy 29:29** "The *secret things* belong to the LORD our God, but the *things revealed* belong to us and to our sons forever," So, what has been revealed can be known truly and absolutely. At the point where we know with understanding God's revelation our knowledge corresponds precisely with God's knowledge.

God's attributes can be divided into two categories; communicable – those that are easy to communicate because similar to human qualities or concepts and incommunicable – those that are more difficult to grasp because less similar to human attributes or concepts

## God's Attributes

### **Communicable**

Sovereign

Righteous

Just

Loving

Omniscient

### **Similar Human Attribute**

causation; authoritative convincing

conscience, need for law

moral judgment; dislike of evil

personal love

knowledge

### **Incommunicable**

Omnipresent

Omnipotent

Immutable

Eternal

### **Similar Human Concept**

geometry and space

energy

stability (in nature, personalities, etc...)

time

## Some Incommunicable Attributes of God and Similar Human Concepts

1. The attribute of **omnipresence** means that God is simultaneously and completely present at every point in space and time (I Kings 8:27; Ps. 139:7-12; Isa. 41:10; Matt. 28:20; John 8:58). Our ability to imagine ourselves to be at some remote location is something like His omnipresence (e.g. where you were on your honeymoon, a desert isle). The human concepts of geometry and space are similar to God's omnipresence.

However, His omnipresence is not identical to our concepts of space and geometry. For example, God is not partly here and partly there, but wholly everywhere. A. W. Tozer recalls the experience of a Christian missionary to India:

Canon W. G. H. Holmes of India told of seeing Hindu worshipers tapping on trees and stones and whispering, 'Are you there? Are you there?' to the god they hoped might reside within. . . .God is indeed there. He is there as He is here and everywhere, not confined to tree or stone, but free in the universe, near to everything, next to everyone, and through Jesus Christ immediately accessible to every loving heart.

This is the attribute of God you should lean on when you feel lonely or depressed.

2. The attribute of **omnipotence** means that God can do anything compatible with His character (Exod. 15:2-10; Pss. 33:6-9; 104; 136; Isa. 41:10; Jer. 32:17,27; Eph. 3:20; Rev.

19:6). The human concept of energy is a finite replica of God's energetic nature. Our experience of doing physical work and personally influencing other people is something like the His omnipotence.

Yet His omnipotence is not identical to creature energy. Humans get tired and must replenish our energy through food, drink, and rest. God never gets tired. God is not dependent on anything outside of Himself to sustain Himself. He is self-sustaining. This is the attribute of God you should lean on when you get tired.<sup>iii</sup>

3. The attribute of **immutability** means that God's character never changes. He is the only stable, fixed reference point. The stability of His character is the basis of trust, communication, and scientific measurement (Mal. 3:1-6; Heb. 6:17; Jas. 1:17). Note that this attribute refers to His nature, not to every statement He makes. For example, in Exodus 32:12, 14 and Amos 7:3,6, God threatens judgment from which He "repents" (changes His mind) in response to prayer!<sup>iv</sup> God may change His mind but that does not change God's character. Our experience of people who have unusually stable personalities or of so-called "natural laws" and "constants" in science are something like the attribute of immutability. These things are finite replicas of God's immutable character.

Nonetheless, His immutability is not identical to stable personalities, natural laws, or constants. Personalities do change (even if ever so slightly) and God has at times transcended the normal way He governs nature (e.g. miracles). But His immutable character is absolute, never to be changed. His immutability is also personal and not an impersonal abstract "law". This is the attribute of God you should lean on when things seem chaotic in your life.

4. The attribute of **eternality** means that God has always existed; He has no beginning or end (Gen. 1:1 cf. John 1:1; Isa. 43:10; 44:6; Ps. 90:1-4; John 8:56-58; Rev. 1:8). Our experience of time or the length of history is something like the attribute of eternity. The quality of time or history is a finite replica of the God's eternal nature.

However, eternity is different than time. For example, God is never "hurried" to make a decision; He has all eternity to view what to us is a split-second occurrence. Moreover, He can experience at once all facts and interrelations of facts without becoming trapped in a temporal sequence of events. This is the attribute of God you should lean on when you run out of time.

The concepts of geometry, energy, constants, and time are not as personal as choice, holiness, love, and knowledge. So let's turn now to the communicable attributes, those which are easier to grasp because more similar to human qualities or concepts.

### Some Communicable Attributes of God and Similar Human Attributes

5. The attribute of **sovereignty** means that God personally wills His own nature and is the ultimate cause of all things. God's will within His nature is *free* (undetermined by anything outside of Himself) and *necessary* (because of His nature). God's will toward the creation is *not necessary* (didn't have to create) but is *free* (undetermined by anything outside of Himself). Chance is excluded because He is the ultimate cause of all things (Prov. 16:4; 21:1; Isa. 46:8-13; Rom. 11:36; Eph. 1:11). Our experience of causation in everyday processes around us is something like his sovereignty except that His "causation" is personal, not some impersonal process (e.g. striking a match, mixing two chemicals together). The closest analogy in our experience is when we authoritatively influence someone to do something. That is something like God's sovereignty

However, His sovereignty is not identical to cause-effect in the creation. It cannot be modeled by a notion of physical law, of a robotic system, or by any other determinism. Impersonal determinism is the only way the pagan mind can picture total control because it rejects an Infinite-Personal Creator and the Creator/creature distinction. We should learn to rejoice in His sovereign nature without falling into this common trap! This is the attribute of God that enabled the great General Stonewall Jackson to not even flinch as canon and bullets whizzed by him.

6. The attribute of **holiness** means that God's character is perfectly righteous and just. By *righteous* is meant that His moral character is the standard for right and wrong everywhere in the cosmos (Exod. 9:27; Jer. 12:1; Rev. 16:5-7). By *just* is meant that His judgment upon evil is uncompromising regardless of who might be involved (Deut. 4:24; Ezk. 18:4; Rom. 2:11). The human conscience and the need for law is something like His attribute of holiness.

Yet holiness does not refer to some set of abstract moral principles outside of God's nature to which He Himself must adhere. He never demands something because it is "right" in and of itself; instead, something is "right" because it reflects God's nature. A ruler once approached Jesus and said, "Good teacher. What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."

7. The attribute of **love** means that God gives Himself to others. Love requires an object. Only with a Triune God can this attribute function eternally. God the Father could love the Son, God the Son could love the Father, God the Spirit could love the Father, etc...(John 17:24). This means that God did not have to create the universe in order to have an object to love. God has revealed His love to mankind by sending His Son to this planet to redeem us (Exod. 20:6; Deut. 4:37; John 3:16). Our experience of personal love and at times passionate love is a finite replica of His love.

The attribute of love, however, cannot be identical with the human attribute of love. God's love is never contingent upon the object. He never tires of expressing His love. His love never becomes a mere principle or emotion.

8. Finally, the attribute of **omniscience** means that God has total knowledge of all things actual and possible including total knowledge of Himself (1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 11:21-23; Heb. 4:13; 1 John 3:20). Our experience of knowing there is a standard of truth (conscience), of learning through our mental perceptions of reality, and our ability to create in our imagination is something like the attribute of omniscience.

Nevertheless, like other divine attributes, His omniscience is not identical to human knowledge. God never learns anything. He knows everything. His knowledge is its own standard of truth, it is universal, is independent of perception and learning, and can cause the truths it knows.

## **DECREE OF GOD**

What is the decree of God? The decree is the entire plan of God including all events which will ever occur. According to Eph 1:11 and Heb 6:17 God's decree is fixed, unchangeable. This means that God's decree can never be frustrated by angelic or human choices. Choices of men and angels never surprise God and God never adjusts His decree to fit future acts of men or angels. God's decree was not formulated on the basis of foreseen acts of angels or men but solely on the basis of His will (Eph 1:11). Not only are the ends decreed by God but also the means to His ends are included in the decree (Isa 40; Job 38-41; Isa 46:8-13). That being said...

There are three basic ways God has planned to bring about His decree. *First*, God's decree includes His direct action of bringing some things to pass (e.g. creation). *Second*, God's decree includes His indirect action of bringing some things to pass through created agents or nature (e.g. inspiration of scripture, judgment). *Third*, God's decree includes things that

He decisively permits to come to pass (e.g. all sin, evil, suffering, unanswered prayer, temptation). These three aspects of God's will are known as the Ultimate, Effective, and Permissive Will of God. What this ultimately means is that, while difficult to understand, the all-encompassing decree of God includes all the acts of men.

Within this decree God, in His divine and loving wisdom, chose to give man a measure of freedom but this freedom **does not** introduce any element of uncertainty. The Divine decree must come to pass. Dr. Chafer says,

The will of the creature is a creation of God and in relation to it God sustains no timidity or uncertainty. He made the creature's will as an instrument by which He might accomplish His sovereign purpose and it is inconceivable that it should ever thwart His purpose...When exercising his will, man is conscious only of his freedom of action. He determines his course by circumstances, but God is the author of circumstances.<sup>v</sup>

Although this is difficult to understand the Bible is clear that what man does God has decreed and yet angels and men are held responsible for their choices. This can only mean that God's decree includes responsible choice. From man's perspective our acts are free. But "it should be deemed no crime on the part of God that He discloses to His own elect that His sovereign power and purpose are working through and over all human forces and secondary causes."<sup>vi</sup> However, this does not mean that God's decree is fatalism—a blind, mechanical control of events—but instead it is an intelligent, loving, and wise plan in which man is held responsible for his choices and believers are rewarded for their good works.

**Freedom of Choice**. At this point I must tell you that there is a difference between a person's choice and a person's will. Choice is that which springs from the will. The will may have many choices presented before it but it can make only one choice. Choices are "free in the sense that the individual is not conscious of any necessity being imposed upon him".<sup>vii</sup> IOW's choices are free in that you are not always conscious of external or even internal influences leading you to make a choice. However, oftentimes you are conscious of the influence of a friend, a parent, or a well-respected teacher. It would be absurd to assume that you have made all choices independent of influences. Does that mean your choices were not free? Of course not! You may have had many influences but the final choice is considered free even though it is the result of the strongest influence. Now, what about the...

**Freedom of Will.** Over against the sense of freedom of choice which you experience, the Scriptures teach that there are far-reaching restraints upon your will. For example, in Eph 2:2, unbelievers are said to be “energized” by Satan (Gk. *energeo*). This means Satan has almost unlimited domination over unbelievers. However, in Phil 2:13, of believers, it is said that God “energizes” them (Gk. *energeo*). This means God has almost unlimited domination over believers. So, we can conclude that the entire human race is under the superior influence of either God or Satan. No one is free from these influences even if you never detect the influence. Just because you cannot detect an influence does not mean it is not there. Indeed, we find in God’s word that it is there and God’s word is a much firmer ground than our fallible human senses.

For example, in relation to salvation, the tension point in this question, the Bible teaches that God must influence a person if they are ever going to believe in Christ as Savior. **John 6:44** “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him;” No one has the “power” the “ability” (*dunamis*) to come to Christ unless the Father draws (*helko* – to drag, to draw) him. The Father must influence a person or else they will never believe. Indeed, all whom the Father does influence will believe (v. 37). At the same time the Bible teaches that whosoever believes has eternal life. **John 3:16** “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” What John 3:16 does not teach is that everyone has the ability to believe. Indeed, some men never hear the gospel message. They rejected the knowledge of God in creation and would have rejected the gospel had they heard it. So, John 3:16 does not teach that all men will have the opportunity to believe or even that everyone who hears has the ability to believe. What the words teach are that God loves all men, that He gave Jesus Christ to die for all men, and that out of all men, anyone who does believe has eternal life. Two verses later it teaches that those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed (John 3:18). What the Bible teaches is that if the Father draws a person (influences them) then they will believe. Their choice to believe is free in the sense that they normally do not detect the superior influence of the Father. This is where misunderstanding arises. So far as a person is aware “they are certain that they act freely; yet every truly regenerate person will testify that he would not have turned to God apart from that all-important drawing of his heart. Divine election is absolute. If this seems to some to be taking things out of the hands of men and committing them into the hands of God, it will at least be conceded that, when thus committed to God, things are in better hands and this, after all, is God’s own universe in which He has sovereign right to do after the dictates of His own will.”<sup>viii</sup>

So, the Bible teaches that...

- 1) every unbeliever is under the influence of Satan (Eph 2:2)
- 2) the Father must enable (influence) an unbeliever to believe (John 6:44)
- 3) all who the Father influences will believe (John 6:37)
- 3) whosoever believes has eternal life (John 3:16)
- 4) a person is held responsible for not believing (John 3:18)

This is truly a perplexing difficulty but the Bible is clear that the divine decree includes responsible choices. The ultimate end is that God might be glorified forever. “Before such a God, man can only bow in submission, love and adoration.”<sup>ix</sup>

## **Some Interesting Passages Relating God’s Sovereignty and the Human Will**

### **In Relation to Evil**

**Proverbs 16:4** <sup>4</sup> The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, Even the wicked for the day of evil.

God “did not create man a sinner, but man in His purpose and by his own choice became a sinner, all of which was in the sovereign decree and eternal plan of the Creator.” (Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament, p. 1021).

### **In Relation to Man**

**Proverbs 16:9** <sup>9</sup> The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.

A man’s mind “plans by thinking and meditating”) **his way**, what he intends to do. But the Lord, in contrast to man’s anxious and independent devising of his own way, **directeth his steps**. If the man yields his will to God’s will, then the result is always happy. If the man persists in self-will and self-direction, the Lord is still sovereign in the disposal of his steps, overruling—despite man’s freedom of choice—by His all-ordering providence. Indeed, God has at His control our very thoughts (Exod 34:24); so the wise course is always to “commit [our] way” to Him (Psalm 37:5, 23) and let Him bring to pass whatever is best.” (Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament, p. 1022).

### **In Relation to the Crucifixion**

**Acts 2:23** <sup>23</sup> this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death.

**Acts 4:27-28** <sup>27</sup> "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles

and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

### **In Relation to All Things**

**Isaiah 46:8-13** <sup>8</sup> "Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. <sup>9</sup> "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, <sup>10</sup> Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; <sup>11</sup> Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned *it, surely* I will do it. <sup>12</sup> "Listen to Me, you stubborn-minded, Who are far from righteousness. <sup>13</sup> "I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off; And My salvation will not delay. And I will grant salvation in Zion, *And* My glory for Israel.

**Ephesians 1:11** having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

**Romans 11:36** <sup>36</sup> For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen.

### **In Relation to a Person Believing**

**John 6:37** <sup>37</sup> "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. **John 6:44** <sup>44</sup> "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

### **In Relation to Believers and Unbelievers**

**1 Peter 2:6-8** <sup>6</sup> For *this* is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER *stone*, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." <sup>7</sup> This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER *stone*," <sup>8</sup> and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this *doom* they were also appointed.

John 1:13

2 Thess 2:13

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- <sup>i</sup> Thieme, R. B., Jr., *The Trinity* (Houston, TX: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1993), 5.
- <sup>ii</sup> Thieme, R. B., Jr., *The Trinity* (Houston, TX: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1993), 5.
- <sup>iii</sup> The human body will “conserve” energy by regulating its metabolic status. Like a thermostat turns on and off, regulating a specific temperature so our bodies regulate themselves. This is what biologists call *homeostasis*. The human body tells itself to stop working out, running, etc...in order to conserve energy and protect itself from harm. God does not need to conserve energy. When God works there is no loss of energy. He can neither gain nor lose energy. God is pure energy. He therefore has no need to “conserve” energy.
- <sup>iv</sup> That God answers prayers fits well under the attribute of impassibility. That God has feelings and emotions but only responds out of those if He wills to. God cannot be hurt by His creatures or affected unless He wants to be.
- <sup>v</sup> Chafer, L. S., *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 241.
- <sup>vi</sup> Chafer, L. S., *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 242.
- <sup>vii</sup> Chafer, L. S., *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 240.
- <sup>viii</sup> Chafer, L. S., *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 242.
- <sup>ix</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 44.

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